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### The Book of Ruth: Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace

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# The Book of Ruth: Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace

## **Abstract**

I propose a reading of The Book of Ruth that takes seriously the pastoral concern for refugees, migrants, and their families that was embodied in the life and teaching of Pope John Paul II. The Book of Ruth models virtues and practices that can help build up a society in solidarity, kindness, and peace. Ruth's decision to stand beside Naomi demonstrates the value of solidarity in creating a hopeful future for families and communities. Naomi's role in bringing Ruth and Boaz together shows prudence and a sense of responsibility for shaping the common good. As for Boaz, he is an exemplary model of generosity and kindness. With respect to peacemaking, The Book of Ruth shows how enmity and distrust between nations might be overcome, with God's help

## The Book of Ruth: Solidarity, Kindness, and Peace

Frederick W. Guyette

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### *I. Solidarity: Ruth's Commitment to Naomi*

I propose a reading of The Book of Ruth that takes seriously the pastoral concern for refugees, migrants, and their families that was embodied in the life and teaching of Pope John Paul II. Not long ago, when I was reading the encyclicals of John Paul II and The Book of Ruth as separate projects, it began to dawn on me that it might be fruitful to let each of them shine their light on the other. That is how this study began to take shape. A good place to begin is with the following passage, part of John Paul II's Message for World Migration Day in 1998.

The Church looks with deep pastoral concern at the increased flow of migrants and refugees, and questions herself about the causes of this phenomenon and the particular conditions of those who are forced for various reasons to leave their homeland. In fact, the situation of the world's migrants and refugees seems ever more precarious. Violence sometimes obliges entire populations to leave their homeland to escape repeated atrocities; more frequently, it is poverty and the lack of prospects for development which spur individuals and families to go into exile, to seek ways to survive in distant lands, where it is not easy to find a suitable welcome.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Ruth is also about migrant workers and refugees, who are wondering whether it will be possible for them to “find a suitable welcome.” It begins with a focus on Naomi and her family. Naomi is the wife of Elimelech, and the mother of their two sons – all four having been born in Israel. When famine threatens, they migrate from Bethlehem to Moab, searching for food and for work. In Moab, however, Naomi and her family find little relief. Elimelech passes away. Naomi's sons find two women of Moab to marry, Ruth and Orpah, but then her sons die, too. There is no conceivable hope, then, for Naomi to have grandchildren in the generation to come. Mindful of her losses, Naomi decides to quit Moab and return to the land of Israel. As she speaks to the people around her, it is easy to hear the deep disappointment in her voice:

#### 1. Naomi moves from reasoned, caring persuasion in 1:8:

“Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.”

#### 2. To a complaint against God in verse 13:

[To Ruth and Orpah]: “It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.”

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message for World Migration Day*, 1998, Accessed: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_09111997\\_world-migration-day-1998\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_09111997_world-migration-day-1998_en.html)

3. This is followed by a sharp command in verse 15:

[To Ruth]: “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

4. And then a very public lament in 1:20-21:

[To the people of Bethlehem]: “Do not call me Na'omi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Na'omi, when the LORD has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Though Ruth and Orpah have begun to follow Naomi on the road back to Bethlehem, she believes that their prospects for marriage and family are still better in Moab than in Bethlehem. Orpah reluctantly agrees with Naomi's assessment. She turns back and fades from view on the road back to Moab. Orpah bears no reproach, but we hear no more about her fate.

Naomi is no longer able to see a meaningful future for herself, and she is willing for her association with Ruth to come to an end. Ruth, however, is steadfast in her loyalty to her mother-in-law, and she expresses this loyalty in a very poetic way (1:16-17):

But Ruth said, “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.

Because Ruth has taken the initiative, expressing her desire for solidarity and friendship with Naomi, something new and unexpected comes into their story. Ruth's loyalty to Naomi shows how the practices of covenant (*berit*) and lovingkindness (*hesed*) are not just for diplomats at the royal court, not just for special times of worship in The Temple, but also for the day to day challenges faced by widows, migrant workers, and refugee families who have no settled home.<sup>2</sup> *Hesed* is a practice of generosity and good will that goes beyond what is expected or what is customary. *Hesed* is motivated by love of God and love of neighbor, and seeks the welfare of another person.

*Hesed* fits very well with John Paul II's definition of solidarity as “taking responsibility for those who are in trouble.”<sup>3</sup> John Paul II describes the importance of making these commitments to others in *Dives in Misericordia*:

This authentically evangelical process is not just a spiritual transformation realized once and for all: it is a whole lifestyle, an essential and continuous characteristic of the Christian vocation. It consists in the constant discovery and persevering practice of love as a unifying and also elevating power

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Smith, ‘Your People Shall Be My People: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16-17’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 69, No. 2, 2007, pp. 242-258.

<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message for World Migration Day, 1996*, §5. Accessed: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_25071995\\_undocumented\\_migrants\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_25071995_undocumented_migrants_en.html)

despite all difficulties of a psychological or social nature: it is a question, in fact, of a merciful love which, by its essence, is a creative love. In reciprocal relationships between persons merciful love is never a unilateral act or process. Even in the cases in which everything would seem to indicate that only one party is giving and offering, and the other only receiving and taking (for example, in the case of a physician giving treatment, a teacher teaching, parents supporting and bringing up their children, a benefactor helping the needy), in reality the one who gives is always also a beneficiary.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note the extent to which reciprocity and mutuality are part of John Paul II's description of solidarity. It is not a matter of one individual who provides help and another individual who receives it. Rather, each needs the other and each gives to the other.

## *II. Boaz: A Model of Kindness*

For Naomi, the journey to Bethlehem means returning "home." For Ruth, however, it is a journey into unknown territory. Ruth, a newcomer, goes quietly into the margins of the fields near Bethlehem, and respectfully asks for permission to gather whatever the harvesters might leave behind. Thanks to Ruth's initiative, she and Naomi will be able to survive in Bethlehem, though it is not yet clear whether they will be able to thrive.

Boaz comes out to check on the progress his workers are making, greets them in the name of The Lord, and immediately notices a young woman he does not recognize. So Boaz asks the foreman, "Whose girl is this?" Though that expression probably sounds very odd to our modern ears, it was a common assumption in that time and in that place: every young woman had to "belong" to a man – father, uncle, or husband.<sup>5</sup> For a young woman to be her own agent, to be able to decide for herself the direction her life might take, would never have occurred to Boaz, or to any man. Yet, Boaz does take the trouble to find out more about the stranger there in their midst.<sup>6</sup> That is how he learns that this is the young woman who joined Naomi on the road back to Bethlehem. Already he has heard of her loyalty and kindness to Naomi, and how she left behind the gods of Moab in order to "find refuge under the sheltering wings of The God of Israel." Boaz is very much aware that a young woman alone and in the open is vulnerable to sexually aggressive men.<sup>7</sup> Being an honorable and considerate man, Boaz gives special instructions to his laborers: Leave extra grain for Ruth to gather up, and do not let anyone harm her.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 1980, §14. Accessed:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30111980\\_dives-in-misericordia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia_en.html)

<sup>5</sup> Even today, however, in many places throughout the world, "Whose girl is she?" is still a common question. See Mercy Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 2002, p. 69

<sup>6</sup> Kristin E. Heyer, 'Strangers in Our Midst: Day Laborers and Just Immigration Reform', *Political Theology*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2008, pp. 425- 453.

<sup>7</sup> In Judges 19, an unnamed concubine is brutally raped by a mob and left for dead. According to Israel's law, she should have been protected by those who did know her name: the men of her own household. However, they failed to meet their covenantal obligations toward her.

<sup>8</sup> Juliana Claassens, 'Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 74, No. 4, 2012, pp. 659-674

Boaz addresses Ruth directly, calling her “my daughter.” In just two verses (2:8-9), Boaz gives her no less than seven commands. These imperatives, however, are not the harsh words of an overseer or a taskmaster. Rather, they are the gentle words of a protector and an advocate who cares about Ruth’s dignity. “Now listen, my daughter. Do not go into another field to glean. Stay close to my young women. Keep your eyes on what they do and follow behind them. If you get thirsty, go to our vessels and drink from our water.”

Ruth does not take his kindness for granted. Bowing low to the ground before him, she makes it plain that she hopes to keep on finding favor in his sight. “You have given me comfort and encouragement,” she says, “even though I am not one of your servants.” Toward the end of the day, Boaz invites her to eat with them. Though Ruth has experienced famine and the loss of loved ones in the recent past, now there is gracious plenty for all to share, and she enjoys a newfound sense of belonging, thanks to the generosity of Boaz.

John Paul II’s encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, echoes many of the themes found in the second chapter of Ruth:

The exercise of solidarity within each society is valid when its members recognize one another as persons. Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess. Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same spirit of solidarity, should not adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but, while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed Boaz does have a “greater share of goods” than Ruth, and he is more than willing to be generous. He does not forget that Ruth and Naomi have suffered much, and that God is calling him to help them. Ruth is far from being passive in receiving help from Boaz. She does her part in the fields of Bethlehem, and she expresses gratitude for the kindness Boaz has shown to her, a stranger from another country.

### *III. Naomi: Prudence and Hope for the Future*

The family is a kind of school of deeper humanity. But if it is to achieve the full flowering of its life and mission, it needs the kindly communion of minds and the joint deliberation of spouses, as well as the painstaking cooperation of parents in the education of their children. The active presence of the father is highly beneficial to their formation. The children, especially the younger among them, need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account. Children should be so educated that as adults they can follow their vocation, including a religious one, with a mature sense

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<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, §39. Accessed: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html)

of responsibility and can choose their state of life; if they marry, they can thereby establish their family in favorable moral, social and economic conditions. Parents or guardians should by prudent advice provide guidance to their young with respect to founding a family, and the young ought to listen gladly. At the same time no pressure, direct or indirect, should be put on the young to make them enter marriage or choose a specific partner.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, many years and many cultural differences separate *Gaudium et Spes* from The Book of Ruth. Yet so many of their concerns coincide with each other: the importance of religious education in the family, the young receiving trusted counsel from their elders, care and respect for the other in courtship and preparation for marriage...

Naomi learns that Boaz, her kinsman, has taken a kindly interest in Ruth, and immediately her heart leaps up. She even dares to imagine a wedding between these two. Now it is Naomi who takes the initiative.<sup>11</sup> The harvest season is almost over, and Naomi has reason to believe that Boaz will be staying all night at the threshing floor. She advises Ruth to bathe and anoint herself, and to put on her best clothes (3:3). Ruth will be in an unusual situation, one in which she will be proposing marriage to Boaz. Naomi is counting on the noble character and discretion of Boaz. She cannot be certain of the outcome, but she has confidence that Boaz will not merely “use” Ruth sexually, nor is he likely to ruin her good standing in the village. Ruth’s task is to let Boaz know that she would very much like to be his wife, and then it will be up to him to act as he sees fit – to follow through or drop the matter. Ruth does not know quite what to expect, but she is willing to trust Naomi’s judgment.<sup>12</sup>

Ruth adheres to Naomi’s script as closely as she can, but before she can speak to Boaz, he falls asleep on the threshing floor. Now Ruth must improvise. She decides to lie down next to Boaz, and there she will wait to see what happens next. In the darkness, Boaz wakes up, startled to find a woman so close to him. “Who are you?” asks Boaz. Yes, we would like to know: who is Ruth going to be? Her status has changed several times already as this drama has unfolded. She has been a wife, a widow, a loyal friend, a foreigner, a “daughter of Israel”... Will she soon be taking on another new identity as the wife of Boaz? “Your handmaid...” says Ruth. Her answer has two clear implications: (1) I am hoping that you will be pleased to take me as your wife, but also (2) Naomi needs a secure future, too. Boaz is dumbfounded, hardly believing that he could be so fortunate. Boaz has “admired” Ruth from their first meeting, but he believed he was too old to be of interest to her as a husband. “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich” (3:10).

<sup>10</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, §52. Accessed:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., ‘Theological Reflections on Naomi’s Shrewdness’, *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1989, pp. 283-292.

<sup>12</sup> Irene Nowell, ‘Naomi: Holy Mother-in-Law’, *Bible Today*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2012, pp. 158-163.

Boaz remembers, though, that one significant obstacle remains. There is a kinsman closer than he is to Naomi and Ruth. This kinsman's name is not important, we can think of him as "Old So and So."<sup>13</sup> Boaz must make sure that "Old So and So" does not desire to press his prior claim as redeemer. In the meantime, Boaz sends Ruth home with all the grain she can carry. Then he makes a hasty exit from the shadows of the threshing floor, determined to find this nearer kinsman so they can negotiate the matter in the clear light of day.

Boaz meets with "Old So and So" in the city gate and calls ten men to sit in witness to their discussion (4:2). Boaz first raises the matter of Naomi's land, and this kinsman expresses interest in buying it. Boaz reminds him, though, of the obligations he would also be assuming where Naomi and Ruth are concerned, and suddenly the purchase does not seem so attractive to him. "Old So and So" fades into the background, then, much as Orpah did in the first chapter of Ruth. Boaz quickly brings the transaction to a conclusion, before the other kinsman has a chance to change his mind.

This is indeed the outcome all three have been hoping for – Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.<sup>14</sup> Soon Ruth and Boaz will have a son, and Naomi will have a grandchild to care for. That child's name will be Obed, and Obed will be remembered as one the ancestors of Israel's most celebrated king, King David.

#### *IV. Ruth's Story and the Tasks to Which God is Calling Us*

According to many recitals of Israel's history, Yhwh performed "mighty acts" and "signs and wonders." In Exodus, The Ten Plagues are followed by God's parting of The Red Sea and Israel's miraculous liberation from bondage. God did these things "with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand."

In Ruth, however, there are no big events, at least, not on the scale that we read about in Exodus. Naomi has suffered many losses in her personal life, and she expresses serious doubt about whether God cares for her at all. Boaz is a source of generosity and goodwill to many people in the community, but over the years he has experienced deep loneliness in his personal life. God works quietly through Ruth, a foreigner, to build a family in which their hearts are knit together in faith, hope and love.

All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family "a school of deeper humanity":

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<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2010, p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> See the commentary on Ruth by E. John Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, especially the section on "Four Views of the Marriage" found on pp. 59-74.



this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows.<sup>15</sup>

The women of Bethlehem declare that Ruth's love for Naomi has done her more good than seven sons (4:15)! Moreover, through Ruth's newborn son, Obed, future generations will also be blessed on account of his descendant, King David.

We can appreciate the irony, then, when the narrator says that Ruth "happened to come to the field of Boaz," as if it were by chance (2:3). It sounds like chance is being invoked again when Naomi advises Ruth to wait and see how the matter turns out (3:18). For people of faith, however, it is not by chance that things come about in this way. God is directing the outcome, though the subtlety of God's providence is often hidden from our eyes.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, human beings have their role to play in God's Kingdom, too. God works quietly, perhaps in something as mundane as a family discussion. God is present in a fruitful harvest and in the fields where routine work is being done. We do well always to remember God's care for us, and to acknowledge it with words of blessing and deeds of kindness to others.<sup>17</sup> God is pleased when we welcome a stranger, and when we help a person who is hungry. The words of The Second Vatican Council are especially helpful in forming our consciences:

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, "As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me."<sup>18</sup>

Several comparisons between Ruth, Judges and Ezra can help us draw out some further implications for the tasks of building solidarity and being peacemakers. The story of Ruth is set in the same period as The Book of Judges.<sup>19</sup> The Book of Judges is a frank portrayal of a society that is crumbling into anarchy because of selfish disobedience, violence, and war. Two figures from Judges – Samson and Gideon – can help us focus our attention on the very different ethos that emerges in The Book of Ruth.

<sup>15</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, §21.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)

<sup>16</sup> J. P. Sonnet and Guiu Majà, 'Le Dieu caché du livre de Ruth. Un chemin de lecture, un chemin pour la foi.' *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, Vol. 133, No. 2, 2011, pp. 177-190. Dave Bland, 'God's Activity as Reflected in the Books of Ruth and Esther', *Restoration Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1981, pp. 129-147.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Jay Hendel, 'Ruth: The Legal Code for the Laws of Kindness', *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2008, pp. 254-260.

<sup>18</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, §27.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham Malamet, 'Charismatic Leadership in the Book of Judges' In *Magnolia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, Frank Moore Cross et al. (eds.), Doubleday, New York, 1976, pp. 153-168. See also Tamas Czovek, *Three Seasons of Charismatic Leadership: A Literary-Critical and Theological Interpretation of the Narrative of Saul, David and Solomon*, Paternoster, Bletchley, 2006, pp. 20-30.

Samson possesses astonishing physical strength, a gift from God to help protect Israel from the Philistines. However, Samson consistently squanders that gift in displays that are intensely narcissistic. In one of these episodes, he ties together the tails of three hundred foxes and sets them on fire. Then Samson releases the foxes where he knows they will burn down the crops of the Philistines. What kind of mind deliberately wreaks such havoc on the people who live near him? One with an abundance of kinetic energy, but very little wisdom! That kind of foolishness is easily exploited by Delilah. An attractive and clever woman, she seduces Samson and coaxes him into revealing the secret connection between his strength and the Nazirite vow he has taken. Then Delilah promptly hands him over to his enemies to be humiliated and put to death.<sup>20</sup>

When Ruth approaches Boaz, however, she has a very different set of motives. Ruth has no hidden agenda, no intention to harm Boaz, nor to deceive him. She shows genuine affection for Boaz and she dares to hope in a future they might build together. She is willing to give her heart to Boaz, and she hopes that Boaz will give his heart to her. In John Paul II's weekly talks about the "theology of the body," he spoke about the integration of eros and ethos in marriage and the significance of having "respect for the work of God."<sup>21</sup>

The attitude of respect for the work of God, which the Spirit stirs up in the couple, has an enormous significance for those affectionate manifestations. This is because side by side with it there is the capacity for deep satisfaction, admiration, disinterested attention to the visible and at the same time the invisible beauty of femininity and masculinity, and finally a deep appreciation of the disinterested gift of the other.<sup>22</sup>

This dimension of the moral life is altogether missing from the relationship between Samson and Delilah. In Ruth and Boaz, however, we have a model that anticipates the kind of sacramental love between a husband and wife described by John Paul II.

Gideon, another memorable warrior in The Book of Judges, is a gifted strategist. Gideon is able to rally Israel's small band of soldiers and lead them to victory, even when they are greatly outnumbered by their enemies. Moreover, Gideon receives another wonderful blessing from God: seventy sons. However, he neglects to educate them in the ways of peace. They turn against each other in a bloody civil war, and Gideon's family is swept away in a rising tide of violence.

But let us imagine for a moment how different the outcome might have been if Gideon had been able to teach The Book of Ruth to his seventy sons. John Paul II underscores the moral significance of educating young people in the ways of peace:

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<sup>20</sup> Bernhard Lang, 'The Three Sins of Samson the Warrior', In *Hebrew Life and Literature: Selected Essays of Bernhard Lang*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2008, pp. 129-141. Fred Blumenthal, 'Samson and Samuel: Two Styles of Leadership', *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2005, pp. 108-112.

<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Eros and Ethos Meet and Bear Fruit in the Human Heart*, November 5, 2004. Accessed: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb46.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Respect for the Work of God*, November 21, 1984. Accessed: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2tb127.htm>

I wish to direct my Message for this year's World Day of Peace especially to women, and to invite them to become teachers of peace with their whole being and in all their actions. May they be witnesses, messengers and teachers of peace in relations between individuals and between generations, in the family, in the cultural, social and political life of nations, and particularly in situations of conflict and war. May they continue to follow the path which leads to peace, a path which many courageous and far-sighted women have walked before them! This invitation to become teachers of peace, directed particularly to women, is based on a realization that to them God "entrusts the human being in a special way." This is not however to be understood in an exclusive sense, but rather according to the logic of the complementary roles present in the common vocation to love, which calls men and women to seek peace with one accord and to work together in building it.<sup>23</sup>

Those who read The Book of Ruth are allowed to gaze on a peaceful village, one in which solidarity between neighbors and kin is the norm. Covenant obligations are regarded as important. Boaz goes out of his way to be kind to an immigrant, to protect a stranger he has never met before. There is generosity in Bethlehem: those who have enough food to eat do not forget to share with families who are hungry. There is justice: parties with differing interests can be seen negotiating with each other in an orderly way. There is a sense, too, that what we do today can have a positive impact on future generations. Without the commitment Ruth and Boaz make to each other, no one in Israel would ever have heard of a king named David.

It may be that our political leaders today, informed by the realism of Thomas Hobbes or influenced by Otto von Bismarck's reliance on "blood and iron," will lose touch with the vision of well-tended fields, strong neighborhoods, and the joy that children bring to families in The Book of Ruth.

In the century we are leaving behind, humanity has been sorely tried by an endless and horrifying sequence of wars, conflicts, genocides, and "ethnic cleansings" which have caused unspeakable suffering: millions and millions of victims, families, and countries destroyed, an ocean of refugees, misery, hunger, disease, underdevelopment, and the loss of immense resources. At the root of so much suffering there lies a logic of supremacy fueled by the desire to dominate and exploit others, by ideologies of power or totalitarian utopias, by crazed nationalisms or ancient tribal hatreds.<sup>24</sup>

John Paul II lived through such upheavals himself, and for that reason he was all the more committed to the cause of peace. He impressed this message upon world leaders and all who would listen: the values that guide Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are much, much closer to God's intention for human beings than the violence we read about in the world of Judges.

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<sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message for the XXVIII World Day of Peace, 1 January 1995: Women: Teachers of Peace*, §2. Accessed: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_08121994\\_xxviii-world-day-for-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121994_xxviii-world-day-for-peace_en.html)

<sup>24</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of The World Day of Peace, 1 January 2000: Peace on Earth to Those Whom God Loves!* §3. Accessed: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_08121999\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121999_xxiii-world-day-for-peace_en.html)

The Book of Ezra is set in a very different time – hundreds of years after the stories in Judges – and Ezra faces a very different situation. He returns to the land of his fathers after the long years of The Babylonian Exile. Ezra carries with him an official letter declaring that his authority to interpret the law of heaven is doubly sanctioned, by God and by Artaxerxes, King of Persia. Ezra's mission is to rebuild Israel's society, beginning with The Temple in Jerusalem.

However, a serious problem stands in the way of Israel's renewal: the worship of idols. Ezra believes that idol worship has come into Israel via intermarriage with foreign wives. So Ezra and the people "agree" (Ezra 10:12) that all the men of Israel who have married wives from other countries and other ethnic groups must now send their wives and their children away. The text of Ezra is remarkably silent about the abject sorrow experienced by these broken families.<sup>25</sup> It simply accepts that these things must be done so that the land may be purged of idolatry and true worship may be re-established.

Suspicion of foreigners dominates The Book of Ezra, but Ruth challenges that view. To be sure, The Book of Ruth assumes that enmity and mutual distrust between Judah and Moab have been growing over the course of many years. After the Exodus from Egypt, before Israel was settled in The Promised Land, the people of Moab refused to help the Israelites when they needed food and water. The Moabites also paid the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. Subsequent generations in Israel were taught that no good thing could come out of Moab: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever" (Deuteronomy 23:3). It is easy to imagine that every young person in Moab heard similar warnings about the people of Israel.

But what if someone were able to cross that boundary?<sup>26</sup> What if someone dared to form friendships on both sides of a border? Wouldn't that make our decisions about whether we will exclude others considerably more complicated? That is what Ruth does in Bethlehem. Because of Ruth's willingness to stand by Naomi, and because she embraces Israel's God, the people of Bethlehem are obliged to re-think what they have always heard about the people of Moab.<sup>27</sup> "Contrary to received wisdom, someone from Moab can be good. Take Ruth, for example..."

In political discourse today, many people try to stir up animosity against immigrants who are "taking away jobs from real citizens."<sup>28</sup> When we do not actually know anyone from another ethnic group, it is much easier for us to imagine that they mean to harm us and that it is acceptable for us to harm them. As long as the "enemy" remains faceless and anonymous, we do

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher B. Hays, 'The Silence of the Wives: Bakhtin's Monologism and Ezra 7-10', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 33, 2008, pp. 59-80. Daniel Smith-Christopher, 'Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the Foreigner in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology', In *Ethnicity and the Bible*, edited by Mark G. Brett, Brill, Leiden, 1996, pp. 117-142

<sup>26</sup> Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* Georgetown University Press, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> But see also how Bonnie Honig problematizes this view by setting up a dialogue between competing interpretations of Ruth in her essay, "Ruth, the Model Emigree: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration." *Political Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1997, pp. 112-136

<sup>28</sup> Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Stanford University Press, California, 2008.

not have to think about what humiliating him, deporting her, or putting him in prison might mean to him and his family.

John Paul II spoke out on behalf of undocumented migrants, challenging our xenophobic attitudes and our prejudices against others. In our words and in our deeds, he said, the Church must be guided by the primacy of charity. The Church must always be a place where migrants can pray, listen to God's word and celebrate the Lord's mysteries.<sup>29</sup>

In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the task of the various Dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, we might say that Pope John Paul II, The Book of Ruth, and the prophet Isaiah -- all three agree: we need God's reign of justice and peace to grow in our hearts and in our world, starting now.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:6-7)

And that is the kind of moral and spiritual breakthrough that makes it easier for us to imagine that we are being called to work together for justice and peace.

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<sup>29</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message of The Holy Father for the 87<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migration, 2001: The Pastoral Care of Migrants, a Way of Accomplishing the Mission of the Church Today*, §4. Accessed: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20010213\\_world-migration-day-2001\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20010213_world-migration-day-2001_en.html)

<sup>30</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996: Undocumented Migrants*, §5.